

Covering Photography



Whether we buy a book, borrow it from a friend or withdraw it from the library, our purpose, in almost every instance, is to read it. If the book has an illustrated cover, we'll usually give it a brief glance; but even if we fall in love with that cover image and allow it to burn itself into our memory, it is really the content, not the cover of the book, that we are after... and this, dear reader, is as it should be.

The books in this exhibition, however, are not here because of their content; they are here because of their covers: storyline, subject matter... everything that takes place between the covers is, for the purposes of this show, secondary, if not incidental.

Why should we care about book cover illustrations? The quality of the design? The high level of craft? The originality of concept? All good reasons, but in this case not the right reasons. In fact, it may be argued that the unoriginality of these covers is what makes them worthy of examination.

All of these books have been chosen because the images on their jackets reference, in some way, another image; a photograph, to be more precise: a photograph whose significance or popularity has earned it, or its maker, a place in the history of photography.

What? Designers and illustrators stealing pictorial ideas from photographers and using them for their own purposes? Well, yes, and as things turn out, the practice is neither outrageous nor even uncommon. Creative individuals from every discipline have regularly appropriated the ideas of others, at the very least as a foundation to build on. Something once said by Sir Isaac Newton comes to mind:

"If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."

But perhaps Newton is a bit too reverential. More to the point may be a quote by the composer Igor Stravinsky (also attributed to Pablo Picasso):

"Lesser artists borrow; great artists steal."

We live in a culture that remains current by continually recycling its past, and we have done so, to greater or lesser degree, for centuries. In fact, the more past we accumulate, the more we seem to rely on it; we source it for stimulation and rip it off for spare parts. Artists of all disciplines now mine the histories of art and culture as a matter of course, looking for imagery that may inspire them in, or provide justification for, their own works.

In the case of book covers, designers routinely rummage through monographs and anthologies of photographs, in search of source material that may serve as metaphor for the content of the books they have been commissioned to illustrate.

In this exhibition, each book cover is directly compared to a well-known photograph with which it has some degree of similarity. The amount of similarity varies, of course, and that is where the comparison can become interesting: Sometimes the connection is quite obvious; an instance of imitation or even blatant appropriation. In other cases it is more a question of the designer or illustrator being subtly, perhaps even unconsciously, influenced by a particular photographer or photograph. Finally, there may be no direct, or even indirect, trail of influence, but rather, for lack of a better term, an 'intelligent' coincidence; ie, an idea or visual trope that is, as Carl Jung might have put it, part of our collective cultural consciousness. This last type of connection may manifest itself in a variety of ways by groups or individuals who have no obvious connection to each other.

By comparing book cover art to the photographs from which they are, or may be, derived, Imitation, Influence and Coincidence attempts to pose the questions: How far can this notion of influence be stretched before it breaks? How is visual syntax processed by culture, and when does influence end and coincidence begin? Rather than providing specific answers for individual cases, the examples in this exhibition have been assembled in the hope that we may give thought to some of the more complex ideas these questions raise, and, perhaps, be prompted to raise some questions of our own... or at least have a more visually compelling experience during our next bookstore visit.

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